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Programmatic Assessment of Medical Students: Pros and Cons

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Introduction

Traditional versus programmatic assessment

Programmatic assessment is an approach in which the usual particulars pertaining to a learner's competence and professional growth is persistently collected, analyzed and, if desired, supplemented with additional assessment information, with an ultimate aim to inform the learner and their faculty mentor to take a high-stakes decision at the end of a training phase [1]. Programmatic assessment has been regarded as the one to neutralize the endemic problems of traditional assessment and their harmful consequences [1].

In traditional assessment, the primary goal is to pass the student, which results in poor learning skills among the students on the basis of the performance of a learner in a single summative examination [1]. In addition, traditional assessment envisages giving grades to the student and a limited emphasis on the feedback or mentoring aspect [1-3]. Often the proposed assessment methods are single (which just can't assess the complex skills required for a medical graduate to acquire) and are not in alignment with the curricular goals [2,3].

Attributes of programmatic assessment

The best part of programmatic assessment is that it gives equal importance to the assessment and the curriculum and that single assessment does not define the fate of students [3]. In this approach multiple assessments have been proposed across the training phase to capture the competence of a student as a whole [2]. Multiple assessment methods (viz. Multiple Choice Questions, Essay Questions, Short Notes, Objective Structured Clinical/Practical Examination, Work Place Based Assessment, etc.) have been employed as each of them has some issues with regard to their utility (validity, reliability, educational impact, acceptability and feasibility) in medical education [1,2]. Thus, these assessment methods complement each other and aids in the accomplishment of complex objectives [2]. Further, the assessment optimizes the learning function of assessment and certification of a student and ensures that the entire process is valid and reliable (Table 1) [2,3].

Benefits to Students

From the students' perspective, it gives them insight about their learning, aids in becoming competent longitudinally and offers them multiple learning opportunities (which can also be simultaneously assessed by faculty) [3]. Moreover, emphasis is given to assess skills in all 3 domains (cognitive, psychomotor and affective) and all the assessment results are shared with the students, so that they can gauze their performance (self-assessment tool) [1-4]. Also, the students receive meaningful and constructive feedback on their performance to ensure that not only they attain pre-defined professional competencies through personal remediation, but also become a self-directed learner and a reflective practitioner [2,3].

Benefits to Faculty

From the faculty perspective, it enables them to take a robust decision regarding promotion or remediation of a student after the training phase (on consideration of aggregated results of both formal and informal assessments) and assist them to fulfil their responsibilities towards students and public [1,4]. The decision taken by faculty is a well-informed and transparent, in which they are not biased [1]. Further, it aids the faculty to master the art of giving feedback (both quantitative and qualitative) to the students, which plays an important role in the learning of students [2].

Considerations and Challenges

However, before resorting to programmatic assessment, it is of immense importance to involve management and administration, as the process involves high costs and proper planning [5]. In addition, the process is resource intensive and even requires large number of trained faculty (Table 1) [4,5]. Further, the given feedback should be constructive, otherwise it may prove depressing to the students [2]. In order to deal with these challenges, the planning process should involve all stakeholders and periodic feedbacks should be obtained from them to assess whether the planned assessment is meeting the set objectives or not [4,5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, traditional assessment is associated with numerous problems and it does not provide adequate inputs for an assessor to take an evidence-based decision about the fate of a student. In contrast, programmatic assessment support in the facilitation of learning

Programmatic Assessment	
For	**Against**
• Neutralizes the limitations of traditional assessment • High-stakes decision is not based on the outcome of a single assessment • Informal assessments also find a place in the final decision • Feedback is the back bone of the entire process • Both quantitative and qualitative feedback are given equal weight-age • Mentor-Mentee system plays an important role in improving the student performance • Helps Assessors to take an evidence-based high-stakes decision	• It requires extensive microplanning for the success of this form of assessment • The performance in each of the assessments has to be compiled for each student, which is a tedious task • Difficult to quantify for inexperienced faculty members • Feedback can be disheartening, if not delivered constructively • Compilation remains a difficult task • Often it takes a back-seat and faculty members do not find time for the same • Provided the plan for the entire academic year is well designed right at the start of the year

Table 1: Programmatic assessment-for versus against.

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among students by steering them in the right direction, promote robust decisions to justify accomplishment of the learning outcome by students and to evaluate the curriculum, provided adequate planning has been done before its implementation.

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